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Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools In The Urban South, 1865-1890

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Review

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Green, Hilary *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890*. Fordham University Press, \$125.00 ISBN 9780823270118

The Long Fight for African American Education after the Civil War

Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890 offers the serious student of education history a compelling study of education policy and activism in two Southern cities. Green positions her book as a needed intervention for a subfield dominated with attention to rural education. Adding to robust extant scholarship in this area, Green contributes nuanced documentation of the school-building projects by African Americans in the urban South that were already well underway when the Northern missionary and benevolent associations entered the South. Green joins an accomplished cadre of scholars - from Charles Holt and Jacqueline Jones to Steven Hahn - who emphasize the active role played by African American civic and religious groups for equal rights, and the independent mobilization for public schools that preceded the well-worn story of heroic white missionaries. The book endeavors to extend the chronology of Reconstruction beyond the Compromise of 1877 and move the tombstone to 1890 when Congress failed to pass the Blair Bill. Green's book contributes more, however, than just a shift from rural to urban or a change in historiographical chronology. *Educational Reconstruction* demonstrates the complex political negotiations between civic and religious groups, political parties, and the paradoxical relationship of federal, state and voluntary actors. The research design focuses attention to the level of municipalities and their relationship to federal education policy.

The book is at its strongest in chronicling fascinating discussions of African Americans' mobilization to secure federal funding through the Blair Bill. Representative Henry Blair (R-NH) sponsored a bill to promote federal education by allocating 77\$ million dollars to states proportionate to state-level

illiteracy rates. The bill passed the Republican-controlled Senate three times during the 1880s but ultimately failed in 1890. Counter to overplayed claims that a “weak” American state necessarily doomed federal Reconstruction efforts, the history of the Blair Bill provides a puzzling counterfactual. Green reminds us of the tremendous importance of the 1880s – an era far too often overlooked in the historiography of Reconstruction.

As many reconstruction-era leaders argued, schools had the potential to transform how white Americans viewed African Americans in the wake of emancipation. Green suggests that political alliances with Democrats shifted the symbolic status of African American school children. As evidence, Green describes a change in journalists practice of only labeling white public schools as “our schools” but as Freedmen’s Bureau funding eroded, journalists began to use this inclusive term to describe commencement activities at public schools educating African American children (p.111). Green’s emphasis, however, is less on how Africans were received by whites and instead focuses her attention on the advocacy work of African Americans endeavoring to secure equal educational opportunity.

The comparison between Mobile and Richmond documents that while activists in Richmond to push doggedly for equal school funding while whites in Mobile were legally able to disproportionately fund public education for white children. The weakness of the book is that the comparative case design could have been leveraged with greater precision to articulate causal mechanisms for variation between the two port cities.

Green brings the reader into the daily work of education advocates in Mobile and Richmond with rich historical detail. The great strength of *Educational Reconstruction* is in the rich and complex narratives it illuminates rather than topical or theoretical innovation.

Christi Smith is a visiting assistant professor of Sociology at Oberlin College.